



Striking a Balance Between Humanism and Technology

Letizia Airos (March 25, 2016)



Meet the New Consul General in New York, Francesco Genuardi

[IN ITALIANO >>>](#) [2]

We met him as soon as he landed, on his second day of serving as Consul General of New York. Seated beside the Italian and European Union flags, [Francesco Genuardi](#) [3] fielded our barrage of questions, beginning at the beginning: in Brussels, his birthplace. “My parents worked there; specifically, my father worked for the European Community. Originally from Palermo, he was a member of the first wave of Italian officials who left Italy to contribute to the European ideal in Brussels.”

So you could say Europe is in your blood. Yet Brussels is also a city that has seen record-breaking waves of Italian immigrants. What do you remember about the city?



I spent the first eight years of my life there. They were formative years yet of course my age precluded me from being deeply aware of the Belgian or Italian-Belgian situation. However, Brussels has remained very dear to me; it was a landmark in my diplomatic career at [NATO](#) [4] from 2002 to 2005. That provided me the occasion to explore the wealth and variety of its social spheres, the Belgian population, and, in particular, the huge historic Italian community that exists in Brussels.

Any memories of your diplomatic career you'd care to share?

I entered diplomacy with the exams of 1993. I was in Rome until 1998; those were my first formative years, a wonderful time, which lasted longer than usual, during which I dealt with economic and multilateral issues, environmental protection in particular. I have very fond memories of that experience, in part because it gave me the chance to get to know New York; I'd come here often for the United Nations conferences on sustainable growth. That was during the famous 1992 summit in Rio on environmental protection. At that time climate change talks were becoming increasingly organized, which is to say, the concept was emerging that diplomacy must be able to prevent international crises with more robust environmental protection. Of the many wonderful memories, I also remember the time I was press secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, handling one of the best aspects – media relations – that I freely admit is a passion of mine.

Let's talk about this new assignment, shall we?

New York... On the one hand, it is familiar. On the other, I don't, seeing as it has changed so much in recent years. It's a great privilege to be the Consul General here. It's one of – if not the – world's capitals. And it is a deeply Italian city. You can sense the power and presence of Italy on every corner: economically, culturally, socially. So for me it's an honor and a big responsibility.

Mayor of New York Bill de Blasio is of Italian descent. Before moving to New York, you actually visited the place his family comes from. How come?

Yes, I went to [Sant'Agata de' Goti](#) [5], where the mayor's grandparents come from. While I was preparing for my new assignment, I felt curious as well as compelled to visit such a beautiful place now connected to New York. I met with the town mayor, various officials, and members of the [de Blasio](#) [6] family. It was a wonderful experience; I sensed there was a kinship, a feeling, a kind of direct line between Sant'Agata de' Goti and New York. I was able to glimpse firsthand the people there and how proud they were that one of their descendants is now stewarding such a major U.S. city. And who can forget the long line of great Italian-American mayors of this city...

There's another country that played an important role in the career – and not only the career – of Francesco Genuardi. Tell us about Argentina.

It was the first place I was stationed abroad, as vice consul, from 1998 to 2002. It was an extraordinary experience that made an impact on me, professionally speaking, since it was there I first encountered the power and presence of the Italian community abroad.

The Italians have contributed a lot to the birth and growth of major nations like Argentina and the United States. It was also crucial to me from a personal point of view: I had the good fortune to meet my wife there. She is from Buenos Aires. It's difficult to describe the Italians in Argentina in just a few words.

The history is very intense – passionately Argentinean and passionately Italian. People there manage to combine both cultural heritages in a very natural, very potent way, and I believe there's a sense of mutual admiration between them. It's quite fascinating.

Let's talk about the Italian community in the United States. What do you think Italy has to offer Italian Americans. And, vice-versa, what can Italian Americans offer Italy?

The large swath of the American population of Italian descent represents the crux of the relationship between two countries as closely linked as Italy and the United States. I would like to point out the importance of the recent meeting in Washington between President [Obama](#) [7] and our new ambassador, [Armando Varricchio](#) [8], during which Mr. Varricchio presented the president with his credentials. What we saw in that occasion is the strength of the bond between Italy and the U.S. and how crucial the Italian-American community is in this regard. Our task, as representatives of Italy's institutions, at the service of the embassy in Washington, is to constantly strengthen that bond and show Americans what Italy today is all about. The community is the expression of that relationship between Italy and the United States.



There is also the new wave of immigrants. Can the institutions do more to reach out to those people? I'm thinking of the 'Meet the New Italians' initiative recently launched at the consulate, meetings between young people and various Italian professionals in New York.

That is crucial to how the Italian consulate should operate within the United States. A part of the Italian community is made up of young people who have taken advantage of the enhanced mobility that characterizes the times and chosen to move here. The consulate must be able to interact with these people; '[Meet the New Italians](#) [9]' is one way of doing so and I intend to continue and build upon that initiative. I would like to convey to this new generation that they have the support and ear of Italian institutions, and that we understand and will respond to their problems and aspirations. We have to get the authorities at the consulate involved as well as, perhaps, other generations from the Italian community who have been rooted here longer. That's what the Italian consulate general has begun, using the strategies outlined by the embassy, and I think that's a course of action we want to follow increasingly.

It's also a way of telling Italians of the new migration - let's call it the new mobility - that we are here and ready to listen to them, to help try to start a conversation between the various Italian entities here. We have to structure all of these entities, try to offer all of our services and take advantage of our wealth.

I'm convinced that many immigrants will return to Italy. Italy is our country, the country we feel connected to. But if some don't return to Italy, we're not going to consider them "a brain drain" in today's increasingly globalized world, but an asset to treasure here in New York with the same level of intensity.

Let's discuss America's Italophiles, or Italics, as some people call them. There's a lot of love for Italy here...

It's an extraordinary love that places greater responsibility on those of us who represent the Italian institutions in New York, because we have to be on top of this extraordinary demand for Italy, whether it be human, professional, creative. Not only do we have to seize upon it; we also have to grow it and give it structure. Making a strong, choral presentation of Italy in New York is fundamental. I keep underscoring how during my mandate I want to the Italian institutions in New York to work as a team, under the direction of the Embassy. That way the consulate general, the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [10], [ICE](#) [11], [Banca d'Italia](#) [12] and the [Chamber of Commerce](#) [13] are members of an orchestra that must play well together and appreciate and multiply this love for Italy by strengthening even more the economic and cultural relationship between Italy and the United States. I'm thinking of tourism, food, fashion, culture, film...

This love for Italy has led more and more Americans to want to learn the extraordinary Italian language. It opens a door not only to spread the culture but also to make investments in our country, business, and commerce.

The Italian language is a lynchpin. It is not only a means to rediscover your origins and identity but also a means to bolster our economic presence and American tourism, which is already thriving in Italy. It's a means of expanding our presence on the New York food scene even more. I think it's a major priority which the Minister of Foreign Affairs [Paolo Gentiloni](#) [14], among the myriad problems and myriad priorities facing foreign politics, echoed during a "question time" session in the chamber. Responding to a deputy elected abroad, he said that one of Italy's priorities is to support and strengthen the teaching of the language.

There are many different universities, small and large, linked to Italian culture. Then there are structures like the Casa Zerilli-Marimò at NYU, CUNY's Calandra Institute, the Italian Academy at Columbia, the Centro Primo Levi ... All centers that, even if indirectly, play an important role in what we call the "Italian System." How important is it for you to involve these academic centers in your initiatives?

That is also a strategic point; our relationship with universities is crucial. We're talking about how to prepare for the future, the future of coming generations, how to prepare for the world we'll have to confront in only a few years. I know there's a large and significant presence of Italian professors in the major universities in New York and its neighboring states. I know there are joint structures between American universities and Italian institutions. I'm thinking of the Italian [Academy of Columbia](#) [15], [NYU's Casa Italiana](#) [16], the [Calandra Institute](#) [17], and the [Centro Primo Levi](#) [18] - which works in the Jewish Italian community - vital and very prestigious structures that serve to



maintain and help expand this link between the two academic cultures, the American and Italian. We have to concentrate on that kind of integration even more and also count on the enormous quantity of American students who come to Italy to study. The structures you mentioned are “oil wells” for Italy’s soft power abroad!

Let’s talk about consular services. Maybe I ought to have begun by asking you about that; after all, that’s the first job of a consulate. But first I wanted to get to know the Consul General a bit. Consulates have changed a lot over the years. From a technological standpoint, how important is that change?

Thank you for asking because it gives me the opportunity to reiterate what I said to the staff as soon as I got here. And I’ll take the opportunity to emphasize that I inherited a consulate general that was run by [Natalia Quintavalle](#) [3] in a superlative manner, with an excellent staff, at the level of vice consul and other employees. It’s a priority of my consular mandate to bolster and improve consular services in order to achieve an even higher degree of customer satisfaction. We are doing and will do this by augmenting the technological component involved in administering consular services, which is essential. We must upgrade to keep pace with the times; there’s room for improvement still. We are already working on that at this early stage. And we will work on it during this period. At the same time, we have to strike a balance between our technology and humanity. We can’t forget that we are Italians and we Italians not only need to see a computer, a terminal, and a printer but we also, rightly so, want to see a person with whom we can interact to resolve our problems. The consulate will continue and expand its missions – nicknamed “the Consulate Beyond the Walls” – to meet all the citizens in the consul’s domain, from Newark, NJ, for example, where our office was unfortunately closed, to Connecticut.

You mean Italy isn’t just food and wine, art and fashion, but also technology? It’s a strength our country possesses that is sometimes overlooked. The recent exhibit at the Cultural Institute, “Make in Italy,” made the same point while also recalling the strong human component behind it, technology on a human scale. Such a way of working together enriches a consulate general too.

I don’t think it would hurt us to strive every day to strike a better balance between technology and the human component, but I don’t think that we can aim – like other countries, particularly Nordic countries – to hide the human face administering such services. We’re the country that produced Olivetti as well Humanism and the Renaissance, and we have to combine the two.

Good luck, Consul General, from everyone at i-Italy and our loyal readers!

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[14] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paolo_Gentiloni

[15] <http://italianacademy.columbia.edu/>

[16] <http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/>

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